The King Hygiene Project: Addressing Hygiene Poverty in College Students

Krislynn King
kingkri@bgsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/honorsprojects

Part of the Public Health Commons

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Repository Citation
King, Krislynn, "The King Hygiene Project: Addressing Hygiene Poverty in College Students" (2024). Honors Projects. 982.
https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/honorsprojects/982

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@BGSU.
The King Hygiene Project: Addressing Hygiene Poverty in College Students

Krislynn King

Honors College, Bowling Green State University

Honors Advisors: Christina Igl & Madison Stump-Smith

Faculty Advisors: Dr. Shannon Orr, Dr. Lauren Mazarz, & Morgan Alexander

April 2024
It is no secret that millions of college students across the country face a plethora of obstacles throughout their first four years of college whether it be academic stress, financial troubles, food insecurity, etc. All these issues have received proper attention and assistance through means such as student organizations, government funding, and campus food drives. Bowling Green State University (BGSU) has made it a point of order to address these issues in its own right with examples such as the Falcon Food Pantry, food drives held through the Thompson Family Scholarship program, and its affiliation with the Brown Bag Food Project. The common thread that connects these three is their focus on the subject of food insecurity over any of the previously discussed obstacles college students face. However, there lies another issue impacting the physical, mental, and emotional health of students that I feel deserves further attention: hygiene insecurity. For my Honors Project, I seek to ratify this issue; to shine a much-needed light on the topic. In addition to answering how hygiene insecurity impacts the modern-day college student, I have taken physical action to better the lives of those who struggle with this issue regardless of whether they are a student at Bowling Green State University.

Personal hygiene is the basic level of care needed to feel clean, confident, and comfortable enough to fully engage in one’s day-to-day activities. As the Hygiene Bank puts it, “... [it] is not a privilege and should be accessible to everyone, yet many locked in poverty or who find themselves in crisis due to bereavement, illness or sudden job loss face restricted options. Do we pay our rent or mortgage, heat our home, buy food, fuel or the necessary products to keep clean?” (Yougov et al., 2022). Hygiene insecurity, otherwise known as hygiene poverty, is the lack of proper access to everyday hygiene products due to financial or accessibility issues. An average of one in four individuals struggle with it in one way or another (Simply the Basics, 2022). In addition to its prevalence, another factor that adds to the
devastating nature of hygiene insecurity is how multifaceted it is. It is a highly variable issue that affects each person it encounters differently. For instance, one individual may sacrifice washing their hair because for several days they cannot afford shampoo while another must reuse feminine hygiene products because fresh ones are too expensive. Its fluid nature makes addressing and correcting the issue very difficult.

Although hygiene insecurity and poverty can impact anyone in the community, certain demographics are statistically demonstrated to be at a higher risk. Typically, we see discussions on certain racial and socio-economic groups in aspects such as education, employment, and healthcare; heavily studied areas of concern with a plethora of research documenting them. Unusually, an issue as widely experienced as hygiene insecurity has not received comparable analysis. Certain research has demonstrated, however, that low-income neighborhoods inhabited predominantly by Black and Brown communities are deemed to be the most at risk. Proper access to “… essential, quality, and affordable hygiene products is limited or non-existent. This is sometimes called ‘food and hygiene deserts’. The high cost and low availability of these essential items disproportionately affect these communities, creating a vicious cycle of inequity and leading to adverse health effects – further widening the socio-economic divide” (Simply the Basics, 2023). Without proper access to these essentials, many afflicted individuals and/or their families have to make certain sacrifices to make do. Per a recent research project commissioned by Feeding America, the following data was collected:

33% of low-income families report bathing without soap when they can't afford body wash. 32% report reusing diapers. 74% of low-income families who can’t afford household necessities skip laundry or washing dishes. Of this number, 63% will wash the children’s clothes only to put their child’s needs first. 50% of low-income families worry
about meeting their children’s hygiene needs. 73% of low-income households cut back on food expenses to afford hygiene products. (Provision Promise, n.d.-b)

If left unattended, a continuous deficit in meeting one’s basic hygiene needs can lead to preventable illnesses or the worsening of pre-existing conditions, and thus, being forced to miss work and/or school.

Another major group of the population disproportionately affected by hygiene insecurity is college-aged students enrolled in school. According to a five-year study conducted on the reality of poverty in community college students, more than half of community college students experience a form of basic needs insecurity (Provision Promise, n.d.-c). It is important to note that this study was administered between the years 2015 and 2019; and in the nearly ten years that have passed since its beginning, the numbers have continued to grow. Recent studies have shown that upwards of sixty percent of students living in a post-pandemic society are experiencing basic needs insecurity (Provision Promise, n.d.-c). While personal hygiene is a critical aspect of maintaining peak physical health, it is especially important for college students. If someone does not feel good physically, they are not going to feel good mentally or emotionally. This, in turn, can significantly impact one's educational performance and overall college experience. Per a survey encompassing over one hundred community colleges, almost a third of college students claim they miss class “more than once a month due to hygiene poverty” (Provision Promise, n.d.-a). A lack of proper hygiene can have a constraining impact on self-confidence. These students feel ashamed of themselves, so to prevent any unwanted attention from coming their way, they start to withdraw and slowly isolate themselves from others. They engage less in class, refuse to participate, and hold back from attending supplementary academic lessons.
The numerous articles I read courtesy of Provision Promise, a nonprofit organization created to help those struggling with hygiene poverty, were exceptionally informative and enlightening on the topic. However, there was a common thread running between them that I noticed to be a possible limitation to their findings: the fact that the entirety of their research and surveys were conducted in community colleges. Would their data change if they chose to incorporate larger universities like BGSU? If so, to what extent? Upon looking further into hygiene insecurity for BGSU students, I will admit I was dismayed at how little I could find on the subject in comparison to the community college data I was able to find with relative ease. We know the problem exists, so why is there not more evidence of work being done to correct it on a larger scale? In the few articles I was able to locate, including some past Honors Projects, a majority of them focused on the issue of period poverty. Per a recent study conducted by researchers at George Mason University, approximately fourteen percent of university students experienced period poverty in the past year (Rodriguez & Communications, 2021). While period poverty is a legitimate issue in its own right and deserves the recognition it has received thus far, we as a society must acknowledge that there is more to hygiene poverty as a whole than this one subsection. If we are going to address one aspect of the subject, then we must be prepared to address everything else.

This oversight served as the backbone of my Honors Project wherein I sought to address and act upon the issue of hygiene insecurity as a whole in college students. The foundation of my project from which I built upon my later contributions was a hygiene drive I hosted on campus to collect a variety of donations for students in need, including shampoo, body wash, hand soap, dental products, shaving products, laundry detergent, laundry sheets, and feminine hygiene products. There are various forms of this nature of need, so I wanted to collect what I believed
would be suitable for any student no matter their circumstances. My approach to collecting as many donations as possible was to start from the inside, meaning my connections on campus, and work my way into the off-campus community of Bowling Green, Ohio. As a member of several student organizations and clubs such as the Honors College, the Thompson Family Scholarship program, Tau Beta Sigma (an honorary band sorority), and Chess Club, I was fortunate to have several outlets for me to begin collecting. Once I was able to acquire some donations through these channels, I began reaching out to numerous offices off campus including Dillon Dermatology, Dermatology Associates Perrysburg, Mitchell Dermatology, Corner Dental, Downey Orthodontics, Bowling Green Vision Center, and Best Western. These locations in particular were selected because if they so choose to donate, they could each aid in different aspects of hygienic needs.

Interspersed between my efforts to collect donations were my additional contributions to my Honors Project; the first of which was my volunteering for causes similar to mine, namely the Brown Bag Food Project. The Brown Bag Food Project is a nonprofit organization that provides emergency food and resources to people in need in Wood County, Ohio. In addition to providing food to the community, they also provide a wide variety of hygiene and personal care products, making them an essential asset to local families in need. Throughout the twelve hours I spent volunteering at their location, I was given the privilege of heading the hygiene section once news of my project spread amongst the other volunteers. During the time I was not volunteering off campus, I began promoting helpful resources available to students on campus. In addition to being a professor of political science at BGSU and my primary faculty advisor, Dr. Shannon Orr is the director of the Falcon Food and Resource Community/Falcon Food Pantry. To help spread awareness of the organization she is heading, Dr. Orr allowed me to make some social media
advertisements for them to post on Instagram. These were to remind university students at BGSU that they can receive assistance in more than one area of concern. In addition to alleviating food insecurity, the Falcon Food Pantry also accepts and distributes hygiene products.

Contrary to my initial expectations of what the results of my Honors Project would be, the results of the project you see today incorporate findings of both a physical and non-physical nature. During the genesis of my project, I was expecting to collect a hearty amount of donations and create certain visual displays (I was planning to use pie charts) on how much of each product I got coupled with what branch of hygiene insecurity it would support. But alas, as the year progressed, my initial proposal began to shift. Today, the results of my project include donations to my drive, service hours dedicated to similar causes, and promotional advertisements. In total, I received twelve donations (not including a large bag of feminine hygiene products that were too many to count), served a total of twelve hours at the Brown Bag Food Project, and created three advertisements:
Falcon Food Pantry Accepts Hygiene Products!

Bring Donations to 109 Central Hall
Even though these results differ to a noticeable degree from my initial expectations, these shifts and supplemental creations are where the valuable lessons I learned from this whole experience stem from. From my disappointments with a lack of returned phone calls, emails, and donations, I was able to gain a greater insight into the world of nonprofit organizations while adapting my project into something I believe to be better than what I originally expected.

My and Dr. Shannon Orr’s first meeting to discuss my Honors Project took place in July 2023, the summer before my fourth year as a BGSU student. Now, almost nine months later and approaching the end of this journey, it feels strange in the greatest way to look back and see all I accomplished and reflect on what I learned. First and foremost, I realized how naive and blind I was to the difficulties of running a nonprofit event. I went into this experience mistakenly believing that because I am founded on good intentions, working for a good cause, and have
some pre-existing connections on and off campus, I would have no trouble collecting donations. As I grew to realize this would not be the case, my eyes were opened to the harsh reality many nonprofit organizations similar to mine faced. It made me ponder just how many other causes like mine share my experiences. How many of them have not been able to assist as many people in need as they wanted due to factors out of their control? How did they spread awareness and possibly raise funds for their cause if they were not fortunate enough to have the number of connections that I did? Most of all, how many of these groups have been forced to discontinue their missions as a result?

Nonprofit organizations, despite their well-placed intentions, face a lot of challenges and must work harder than for-profit organizations if they wish to keep their cause going. While for-profit and nonprofit organizations of today both withstand a fair share of setbacks with common issues like technology, accounting, regulations, etc.; nonprofits are forced to face additional challenges that for-profits do not have to worry about. First and perhaps the most notorious is the financial battle. Getting individuals and corporations to part with their money is not an easy task for nonprofits because they do not have anything tangible, like a product or service, to offer in return. In addition, if the nonprofit is relatively new, there is further skepticism on where exactly someone’s donation is going, leading them to question and likely not contribute to the cause (Nicole, 2016). A common solution to this issue is the use of government funding, but government-subsidized or not, maintaining a steady stream of cash flow is incredibly difficult, and thus, thrusts upon nonprofits immense issues with their budgeting. As a result, the majority of their limited money typically must go towards administrative expenses, leaving very little for projects or causes (Unit4 Communications, 2023). Financial aspects aside, many nonprofits additionally experience issues with advertising and marketing. This is a critical
component to running a successful organization because “Systemic and multifaceted marketing is necessary … to create awareness, generate internal and external growth (revenue), raise critical funds and develop relationships, as well as for the overall advancement of a mission” (Gaier, 2023). If one does not ensure that their marketing and advertisement plans are solid, then their chances of success are not great; especially if they are already struggling with the financial aspects of running a nonprofit.

If a future honors student of BGSU were to be similarly interested in addressing the issue of hygiene insecurity and approached me for advice, I would use my experiences with my Honors Project to guide them on the right track. First and foremost, as Dr. Shannon Orr advised me to do, create a timeline for what you want to get done and when. In a project with as many components as mine did, it is easy to get overwhelmed and lose sight of where you are in it. Having that tangible element to look at and check your progress helped a lot with staying organized. Secondly, contradicting what I did in my Honors Project, I would advise that you do all inquiries about donations in person. In my experience, I was far more successful in acquiring donations to my drive when I spoke to my potential donor face-to-face rather than over the phone or via email. It serves as a great way to nonverbally demonstrate your dedication to the cause because you took the time to come meet the individual in person rather than communicating from behind a convenient screen. In addition, it allows you to foster a relationship with the person you are speaking to that online communications simply cannot provide. If I had chosen this route, I anticipate I would have had further success in my quantity of donations on top of the other work I did. Lastly, if they so choose to volunteer and create promotional posters as I had with my Honors Project, I would advise them to establish a connection with the people they are trying to support. Before volunteering at the Brown Bag Food Project and creating the social
media posts for The Falcon Food Pantry, I fostered a relationship with Dr. Orr who has
collections to both. I recommend doing so because, likewise to the point concerning potential
donors, taking the time to establish a personal relationship with influential individuals in your
project can demonstrate your devotion to your project. It also makes the whole experience all the
more enjoyable because you get a personal sense of satisfaction knowing you are helping
someone you care about.
Bibliography


https://www.business.com/articles/4-marketing-challenges-only-non-profits-understand/


https://provisionpromise.org/blogs/promise/hygiene-poverty-statistics-to-know


https://news.ucdenver.edu/college-students-need-menstruation-products-period/


https://www.simplythebasics.org/blog/2023/9/29/hygieneequity

https://www.unit4.com/blog/8-challenges-for-nonprofit-organizations


*Adapted from The Hygiene Bank: Hygiene Poverty 2022.*